

Start Where Your Students Are

Good grades. A quiet classroom. These are often what teachers value. But what if students come to class looking for something else?

Robyn R. Jackson

Cynthia quickly moved through the classroom, collecting the previous evening's homework assignment. While her back was to the door, Jason hurried in and slid into his seat. Without turning around, Cynthia said, "I saw that, Jason."

The class erupted in laughter as Jason blushed. "Take out your homework, and I'll be around in a second to deal with you," Cynthia instructed.

When Cynthia reached his chair and noticed that Jason did not have any work out, she moved past and finished collecting the other papers. She got the class started on a warm-up exercise and called Jason to her desk.

"Where's your homework?" she asked.

"I forgot to do it," Jason muttered.

"So you're not only late to class, but you also don't have your homework? Hmm, this is serious," Cynthia said. "Do you know what you owe me?"

"Detention?" Jason guessed.

Cynthia shook her head. "No indeed. You need to make things right with me. Tomorrow when you come to class, you need to be here early with your homework—

and a Snickers bar. And it better be fresh!"

Jason looked up, startled, then smiled widely. He went back to his seat and got to work. The next morning, he arrived at Cynthia's class with not one but two Snickers bars and cheerfully handed in his missing homework assignment.

When Cynthia first told me this story, I have to admit that I was shocked. It seemed that she was letting Jason off the hook. "Cynthia, please tell me you aren't shaking kids down for candy," I mocked.

She laughed and then explained that too often, we make too big a deal of it when students make mistakes. We treat their mistakes as personal affronts and, as a result, kids are afraid to mess up—afraid that if they do, there is no road back. Over the years, Jason had adopted a cavalier attitude because he believed that once he made a mistake—and he made them all the time—he had ruined the entire school year. By having him give her a Snickers bar, Cynthia showed him a pathway to redemption.

"It isn't about the Snickers bar," she explained. "It's about giving kids a tangible way of redeeming themselves and recovering from their mistakes."

Cynthia is starting where her students are.



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The Currency of the Classroom

Currency is a medium of exchange. Any behavior that students use to acquire the knowledge and skills important to your class functions as currency. For instance, if we teachers value student engagement, we take time and expend effort to make our lessons interesting to students. In exchange for our efforts, students give us their attention, curiosity, and participation. If students value adult approval, they work hard to abide by classroom rules and

do well on assignments. In exchange for their efforts, we show them our approval in the form of praise, special classroom assignments, and attention.

But sometimes students come to school with currencies we find problematic. For instance, a student might use sarcasm as a way of earning the respect of his peers because it shows how clever and funny he is. However, teachers don't usually welcome sarcasm in their classrooms because they see it as a sign of disrespect; instead of gaining their



admiration, it usually incurs their censure. If students don't feel that we understand or value their currencies, they often assume that there is no place for them in the classroom—and they opt out. What's worse, sometimes students *do* carry the preferred currency but resist spending it in the classroom because they resent the fact that it is the only currency we accept.

Currencies even influence the way students acquire the curriculum. The explicit curriculum is the stated objectives, content, and skills that students are expected to acquire. But to access that curriculum, students need to understand and possess certain underlying knowledge and skills.

For example, the explicit curriculum may require that students multiply fractions correctly or explain how geographic features affect migration patterns. But for students to do this, they need to have the right currencies. They need to know how to take effective notes, study from these notes, independently practice applying their skills, learn from their errors and self-correct, pay attention in class, monitor their comprehension, and ask for help when they do not understand.

To demonstrate that they have mastered the material, students need to understand how to write an essay or solve a certain number of math problems correctly under timed conditions. Many students struggle in school not because they can't learn the explicit

curriculum, but because they don't have the currencies needed to access this curriculum.

These types of exchanges happen all the time in the classroom. As teachers, we communicate which currencies we require and accept in our classrooms; our students do their best to acquire and trade in our accepted form of currency. When they already possess—or can obtain and effectively use—our accepted form of currency, they thrive. When they can't, they flounder. In fact, most conflicts in the classroom are the result of a breakdown in the currency exchange.

economic advantages of having earned college credit in high school and the effect that doing so would have on their overall college costs.

Nothing worked. They didn't sign up for the test. It wasn't that they didn't see the benefit of taking the test. They knew it was important. But I realized that I wasn't starting where they were. I was trying to motivate them using my preferred currencies, not theirs.

So I changed my tack. I started a competition among my three AP classes to see which class would have the greatest percentage of test takers. All of a sudden, students were racing to sign

What do we consider to be a good student? How do we reward students for doing well?

A Winning Strategy

When we don't understand the concept of currencies, we often attempt to mitigate classroom problems by attempting to connect with our students through their interests or to backfill any learning gaps we discover. We may even try to reward students in ways that make sense to us but that are inconsistent with what they value. When we focus on superficial traits without also paying attention to students' currencies, we miss important information about what students can do and what they value—and even our noblest attempts to connect with them can backfire.

When I first started teaching advanced placement (AP) English, I attempted to get my students to sign up to take the AP exam by telling them how much it would help them in college. I explained the importance of having a capstone event that would really test how well they had achieved the course's objectives, and I showed them statistics on how much better students did in college after having taken the exam. I even broke down the

up for the test. Within a week, 95 percent of my students had signed up. Although my students could intellectually see the value of taking the test, it wasn't until I connected signing up for the test to something they valued—in this case, it was competition and the camaraderie of affiliation with the "winning" class—that they actually signed up.

Starting where your students are goes beyond playing getting-to-know-you games to understand their likes and dislikes, their interests and hobbies. Such efforts can quickly become superficial. Can you really effectively get to know all 20–35 students in your classroom or make a personal connection with each one fast enough or deeply enough to help each student find a way to access the curriculum? Even if you could, can you really make logical connections between the curriculum and their lives every single lesson, every single day? Our students may be amused by our attempts to discuss with them hip-hop artist Jay Z's latest hit or the plot of an episode of the TV show

Gossip Girl. However, will doing so really help them connect with the curriculum in a way that enables them to leverage their skills and talents to meet or exceed the objectives—especially when that curriculum is not always immediately relevant to their worlds or when we don't understand their worlds well enough to make a plausible connection?

Instead of forging superficial connections, starting where your students are is about showing kids how to learn in ways that work best for them. It's about creating spaces in the classroom where our students can feel comfortable being who they are rather than conforming to who we think they should be. It's about helping kids feel safe enough to bring with them their skills, strengths, culture, and background knowledge—and showing them how to use these to acquire the curriculum.

Getting Started

If we want to start where our students are, we have to understand how currencies are negotiated and traded in the classroom. The first step is to clarify the currencies we value. What do we consider to be a good student? How do we reward students for doing well? What do we think should motivate students?

When we understand our own currencies and recognize that they may be different from those our students value, we open ourselves to recognizing alternative currencies. For instance, earning good grades is a currency we may recognize. Maybe your students are not motivated by grades but really want the approval of their friends. When you recognize that being motivated by grades is really your preferred currency and that approval from friends isn't good or bad, that it's simply an alternate form of currency, you can find ways to leverage this currency to help students learn. Thus, you may stop trying so hard to get students to value grades and

instead set up a classroom culture in which students push one another to do their very best. Understanding your currencies helps you withhold judgment and abandon the idea that your preferred currency is more valuable than those of your students.

Next, we need to unpack our curriculum so we have a better idea of the underlying skills—particularly the soft skills—that students need to be successful. For example, I once worked with a school whose students were struggling. The teachers complained that the students never did their homework.

We sat down as a group and examined the homework assignments. One teacher assigned students to read a chapter of the textbook and take notes in preparation for a class discussion the following day. When we unpacked the assignment, we realized that to complete it, students would have to spend about two hours reading the densely written 19 pages, take 25 pages of notes using Cornell note-taking sheets, and look up 10 vocabulary words. Students would also have to organize their notes in such a way that they could refer to them quickly as support for any arguments they wanted to develop as they participated in the discussion. Now we understood why so many students were not completing their homework.

Once you understand the soft skills that are implied by the curriculum, the next step is to determine which of these soft skills your students already possess and which ones they will need to acquire. You can accomplish this through a quick pre-assessment or by observing how students interact with

the material and with one another.

Or you can ask them directly. I often conduct focus groups with the students in the schools with which I work. I show them a list of the soft skills they will need to be successful in a particular class and ask them whether they know how to do these things. On the basis of their feedback, their teachers and I can

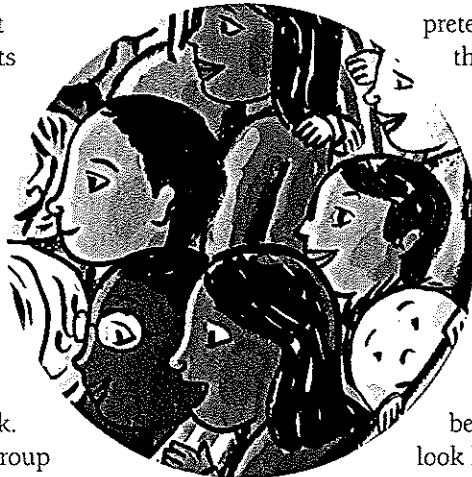
determine what we need to preteach students to help them successfully tackle a particular lesson.

Our students often carry currencies that can help them learn, but we don't recognize that these currencies are valuable because they don't look like the ones we value. For instance, a student

may have a different organizational system for his notebook that works better for the way he thinks, or a student may process information better by talking about it rather than writing about it, or a student may have a method for solving mathematical equations that differs drastically from the one you taught but that is equally sound.

I once coached a teacher who was having difficulty with a student who interrupted her while she was teaching to ask questions and offer comments of his own. He wasn't intentionally being disrespectful, but it drove her crazy. After meeting with the student and his parents during parent/teacher conferences, she noticed that the family all talked at once. It was how they processed information. They thought aloud. At the same time. Loudly.

Once she recognized that his interruptions were not because he couldn't control himself, that they were just how he processed information, she no longer saw them as annoying, but as evidence



that he was thinking and eager to share his thinking with the class. She then was able to figure out a way to help him process the information without disrupting the class. She showed him how to keep a journal during class discussions to write down his thoughts as they came to him and to select one or two comments to share. Eventually, he learned how to participate in class discussions without the journal and to share his thinking appropriately.

Yes, But . . .

When I tell the Cynthia story in the workshops I give, many teachers become dismayed. Although they enjoy hearing about Cynthia's Snickers bar strategy, it doesn't feel comfortable to them. It's a great story, but what about those of us who are uncomfortable with forging a connection over candy?

I once coached a teacher who was having difficulty with her 6th graders. Whenever she gave them an assignment, they would spend the period talking to one another, finding any excuse to get out of their seats. No matter how often she threatened them, she couldn't keep them focused. I offered to observe her classroom and provide her with some feedback, but after being in her classroom for 30 minutes, I didn't see any gross misbehavior. The students were squirrely, but most of their talking was about the work. After school let out for the day, I met with her to discuss what I saw. Before I could begin, she said, "Do you see what I have to deal with? I'm exhausted. They just won't behave!"

"What would your class look like if your students were all well-behaved?" I asked.

"They'd all be in their seats quietly working," she said. "They'd raise their hands and ask permission before they got up to do anything, and they would also raise their hands before talking so that everyone can be heard."

I listened to her list and realized that

she was talking about her currencies. She valued a quiet classroom and thought that was how students learned best. However, her students valued being able to discuss what they were learning with their classmates and getting up and moving once in a while. That was how they learned best. I explained to the teacher the concept of currency and then asked, "If you were sure that your students were talking about the lesson, would you allow them to talk quietly in class as they were working?"



acknowledge his mistake and correct it; Jason wanted a chance to do so without feeling like a failure and a bad person. The candy bar provided the common ground. Had Cynthia asked for an apology or demanded that Jason redeem himself by staying after school and repaying her the time he missed in class by being late, she might have alienated him. But by finding a common currency, she was able to quickly get Jason back on track.

For you, that common ground might be something less tangible. Maybe you

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She thought for a moment; I could tell she was uncomfortable with the idea. Finally she said, "I suppose so, but I'm afraid it might get out of hand."

We finally figured out a way for her to structure the students' conversations so that she could still feel that the class was orderly and productive. She decided to pause during the lesson and allow students time to turn to their neighbors and discuss the information before moving on in the lesson. That way, students had a chance to process the information during the lesson and were less likely to talk about it later on. She found a way to acknowledge their currencies while honoring her own.

Finding Common Ground

When you recognize and honor students' currencies, you don't abandon your own. Rather, you find a common currency that you both carry. This creates a safe place for both you and your students to be who you are. In Cynthia's case, she wanted Jason to

are more comfortable lecturing, but your students are not good note takers. So you provide them with a note-taking sheet that helps them learn in the way that you are most comfortable teaching. Or perhaps you don't like lavishing verbal praise on your students, but verbal praise is their preferred form of currency. So you develop a set of code words you can use with students that signal to them that they have done a good job.

When you start where your students are, when you find that common currency you both carry, you communicate to students that it's OK to be exactly who they are. You create spaces for students to leverage who they are and what they know to access the curriculum. **EL**

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